

## A Short History of Congregation Ahavas Shalom

For Ada Jacobson, one of a handful of eastern European Jewish immigrants living in Newark's north ward at the turn of the century, it was a shame that there no schul<sup>1</sup> for the bris<sup>2</sup> of her firstborn, Saul. She and husband Leopold organized a minyan<sup>3</sup> which met first in their home and then, by 1905, as an organized congregation in a white frame house adjacent to the current building.

This congregation was a bit of a frontier outpost: the bulk of the Jewish community--first the German immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century and later the eastern Europeans in the early years of the twentieth--lived in the central ward and later the Weequahic section of Newark. That community would grow to forty synagogues and produce several generations of educated professionals and businessmen. Ahavas Shalom primarily found its worshippers in the grocers and merchants who served the Italian immigrants of the north ward.

The Congregation built this building in 1921. The magnificent ark, however, is a transplant. Built either in Germany or in New York (New York housed one workshop which turned out both mahogany carousel horses and holy arks), the ark graced the majestic nineteenth century synagogue of Congregation Beth-El, later Rodeph Shalom, at Lexington Avenue and 63rd Street. According to the archival research of our congregant, Professor Ron Hollander, that building was razed in 1926, the ark stored, and then given to Ahavas Shalom. In 1927 one of Ahavas Shalom's founders, Leopold Jacobson, an antique dealer and furniture maker, trimmed and installed it in the six-year-old building.

The photographs on the walls of the social hall document an active congregation through the decades of the thirties, forties and fifties. Rabbis

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<sup>1</sup>synagogue

<sup>2</sup>ritual circumcision

<sup>3</sup>ten Jewish adults, required to conduct prayer services

Tumin, Applebaum and Landa were among those who presided. The social hall saw children's plays, adult dinner dances and card games. There were rural camping retreats. Zionists Sydney Liss and Sadye Gerson campaigned and collected money for the nascent State of Israel. The balcony may have been built for a separate women's gallery that befitted an orthodox synagogue, but both the Jacobsons' daughter, Edna Wechsler, and Sadye Gerson, remember that women sat separately on the left side of the aisle in the main sanctuary, and the balcony was used exclusively for religious school and the rabbi's office.

In 1960 the building was renovated, with the green-painted plywood installed to cover the rain-dampened plaster. Rabbi Marton Guttman and his wife, Susan, natives of Hungary and survivors of the Holocaust, came to the Congregation, via Israel, and Rabbi Guttman officiated for the next 25 years. In 1970 the Congregation celebrated the bar mitzvah of Michael Terry, the last bar mitzvah until today. With the exodus of Newark's Jewish community by the end of the 1960's, some members of Ahavas Shalom wanted to close the synagogue in the seventies, but the determined effort of attorney Ben Arons, sisters Bessie Fried and Sadye Gerson, and Sydney Liss, saved the congregation and building.

In early April 1984, member Israel Stamm, an erudite professor of German literature at Rutgers University who spent Sabbath afternoons reading the classics in Latin and Greek and the High Holidays at the Great Synagogue of Munich, passed away. Marshall Israel Steinbaum was born a week later and took the Professor's name along with that of his great grandfather, Martin Weiner.

Although women and men have sat together in the sanctuary since the sixties or early seventies, during the past five years the synagogue made two important strides. It recognized that it was in fact conservative, rather than orthodox, and two years ago it voted to accord women the full rights that men enjoy so that women now can stand on the bimah<sup>4</sup>, bless the Torah, and count toward the minyan. The first woman to receive that honor was Shari Neumann.

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<sup>4</sup> raised platform from which services are conducted

Of the forty Newark synagogues, all have either moved to the suburbs or merged with other schuls. One other congregation--Mt. Sinai, primarily composed of Russian emigres in the Ivy Hill apartment complex in Newark's Vailsburg section--remains and conducts services daily.

Today, Ahavas Shalom is almost thriving. Led for the past eight years by Rabbi Geoffrey Goldberg, who is now finishing his PhD in religious music at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and more recently by Rabbi Art Vernon of West Orange, Director of Educational Development at the New York City-based Jewish Education Service of North America, the congregation holds services every Saturday morning and celebrates the High Holidays and the other holidays that require Yisgor prayers for the dead. After Sabbath services every week, the Congregation eats lunch together in the social hall downstairs. Ciel Arons prepares the weekly lunches for the minyan, just as Gertie Jast did for many years. The MetroWest Federation's Young Leadership Division has partnered with the Congregation, and young adults have found their way to services here. Individuals throughout New Jersey and elsewhere, some alumni of the synagogue and some with no connection except their interest in its story, donate the money that pays the operating expenses. There have been baby namings, <sup>5</sup>aufruffs<sup>5</sup>, and even a bris. The Newark Public Library's retrospective exhibit on the Jews of Newark prominently featured this hold-out congregation. Busloads of Jewish tourists regularly visit the synagogue, thanks to the Jewish Historical Society, the Jewish Education Association, and the Newark Museum, and more particularly Elizabeth Del Tufo. For the first time a Newark Rabbi, Rabbi Vernon, sits on the City of Newark's Holocaust Commemorative Committee that sponsors the City's annual Holocaust Memorial ceremony originated by Mayor Sharpe James and his Communication Manager, Pamela Goldstein. This year those services will be held on May 15, and Rabbi Vernon will address the attendees at the Bethany Church.

People sometimes wonder how this congregation can continue. The story of Ahavas Shalom has been a story of holy ground and human effort. A number of years ago Father Edwin of St. Benedicts' Academy told the story of his holy order and school's decision to remain on King Boulevard in

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<sup>5</sup>celebration on the Sabbath preceding a wedding

Newark. "The ground was holy and the need was never greater." Ahavas Shalom congregants also have Father Edwin's sense that the place here is holy. The Congregation is frequently surprised as new, younger people discover the synagogue. But the holiness of the institution has only been preserved through years of hard work, and the synagogue you find today is a credit to the older generation who held it together.

Rosemary and Rob Steinbaum